



Elon Statement on CONDITIONS FOR MEANINGFUL LEARNING EXPERIENCES

2023

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From 2020 to 2023, fourteen scholars participated in the Center for Engaged Learning research seminar on (Re)Examining Conditions for Meaningful Learning Experiences. The seminar facilitated international, multi-institutional research on conditions that Moore (2023) identifies as key practices for fostering engaged learning: building on students' prior knowledge, facilitating relationships, offering feedback, framing connections to broader contexts, fostering reflection, and promoting integration and transfer of knowledge. Moore's key practices emerged as cross-cutting themes from the first decade of CEL's research seminars, and the 2020-2023 research seminar provided an opportunity to conduct a deeper, more focused examination of four of the key practices: connections to broader contexts (looking specifically at internships), feedback, reflection, and relationships (including peer-to-peer relationships). This statement summarizes and synthesizes the seminar's meta-level discussions about these conditions for meaningful learning across students' curricular and co-curricular engagement.



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Research Teams

Members of the five research teams include:

Connections to Broader Contexts

Melinda Adams, University of the Incarnate Word • **Jody Jessup-Anger**, Marquette University

Feedback

Breana Bayraktar, George Mason University • **Kiruthika Ragupathi**, National University of Singapore • **Katherine A. Troyer**, Trinity University

Peer Relationships

Mimi Benjamin, Indiana University of Pennsylvania • **Claire Hamshire**, University of Salford • **Alan Soong**, formerly at National University of Singapore



Reflection

Jennifer Dobbs-Oates, Purdue University • **Sarah Hansen**, University of Iowa • **Nicole L. Powell**, Emory University

Relationships

Peter Felten, Elon University • **Rachel Forsyth**, Lund University • **Kathryn Sutherland**, Victoria University of Wellington



TERMS

Feedback

A process by which students seek out and make sense of information received from different sources (e.g., instructors, peers, self, automated responses) about the quality, strengths, and weaknesses of their work to improve their assessed work, learning strategies, and performance.

Internships

A form of experiential learning that integrates knowledge and theory learned in the classroom with practical application and skills development in a professional setting (NACE 2023).

Reflection

Examining, connecting, and making meaning of experiences in order to gain self-understanding and knowledge.

Sense of Belonging

The extent to which students feel accepted by a group.

Trust

One's willingness to be vulnerable to another based on an investment of faith that the other is open, reliable, honest, benevolent, and competent (Tschannen-Moran 2004).



PRINCIPLES ABOUT CONDITIONS FOR MEANINGFUL LEARNING EXPERIENCES

Within the seminar, the condition of **relationships** quickly emerged as a complex and integral component of higher education and student success, drawing the attention of two research teams instead of one. Relationships help provide a **sense of welcoming, belonging, and mattering** that are instrumental to student and faculty success, contributing to Moore's (2023) designation of facilitating relationships as a cornerstone key practice for fostering engaged learning. Empowering students with a sense of belonging can contribute to the creation of a **welcoming, inclusive, and motivating** learning environment. Inherent in these relationships is the necessity that all parties **establish trust** and can be vulnerable in an effort to maximize the success for all learners. Ultimately, in environments and relationships that prioritize reciprocity and **student voice** in the educational learning process, **student agency** emerges.



Fostering environments that maximize learning across these conditions requires the **creation of an institutional culture** that is **intentional in the way it supports students** of varying backgrounds. Clearly and consistently demonstrating the **institution's values through effective communication within and**



outside of the institution (e.g., outward facing documents related to mission, strategic plans, etc.) demonstrates the importance and value of these learning conditions and helps to **engage many community members** (e.g., faculty, staff, and students) across campus. Increasing the commitment of these community members in both curricular and co-curricular spaces maximizes the integration of values throughout the university. Moreover, **these learning conditions are both practices and outcomes.** While institutions often fall back

on outcomes to demonstrate success, if these learning conditions are valuable to the institution, **developmental opportunities** should exist for all stakeholders to become better implementers and participants of these learning conditions, as this will ultimately be important for the success of the institution and the individuals involved.

ENABLING PRACTICES

Practices that foster the conditions for meaningful learning include:

Fostering belonging/mattering. For example, in exploring what factors drive satisfaction with internships, a sense of belonging at a student's internship site was a consistent predictor. Staff and faculty supporting students engaging in internship work may want to dedicate time to working with site supervisors on plans to include and cultivate student belonging as an inclusive practice. Similarly, the Peer Relationships group identified belonging and mattering as important in peer support programs, and the Feedback team found that both the types and delivery of feedback that instructors provide to students help cultivate students' sense of belonging.

Aligning programmatic activities with institutional culture. Teams noted that programs facilitating boundary-crossing reflection, fostering peer relationships, or developing a dialogic instructor-student feedback culture are more likely to be sustained when they align with and inform the institution's culture. As a result, advocates need to adapt successful practices for their own campuses rather than simply copying and pasting models from other institutions. This should also include creating success for learning opportunities that may occur outside the bounds of campus, such as internships, study abroad, and global learning.

Creating multiple pathways. Campuses are more likely to provide quality conditions for meaningful learning for all students, especially students who may be historically marginalized by institutional policies and practices, when they create structural support for multiple pathways. Operationalizing the conditions for meaningful learning is not a one-size-fits-all scenario. Instead, to encourage student agency and acknowledge students' intersectional identities, campuses need to provide multiple avenues for fostering each condition. Similarly, supporting multiple pathways provides entry points for more faculty and staff involvement from across campus programs.

Planning long-term. Likewise, facilitating conditions for meaningful learning – and the trust that often amplifies their impact – requires taking a longitudinal approach. No single moment or construct will have as much impact as intentionally integrated structures and activities that are interwoven across students' educational journey.

Supporting faculty and staff development. Campus professional development initiatives also need to be attentive to and intentional about the conditions for meaningful learning. Academic developers are well positioned to help faculty integrate support for the conditions throughout curricular spaces, and to foster an attentiveness to intentionally introducing and practicing these conditions. Similarly, campus professional development programs should support student life staff's integration of the conditions into co-curricular spaces.



RECOGNIZING AND STUDYING CONDITIONS FOR MEANINGFUL LEARNING EXPERIENCES

Student experiences and equity lay at the center of the successful, inclusive, and reciprocal functioning of these four conditions for meaningful learning experiences. To examine their research questions, teams used a variety of qualitative and quantitative methods across multiple institutions:

- The Reflection team carried out three institutional **case studies** by conducting **focus groups** and **interviews with students and faculty**. Focusing on schools that demonstrated institutional reflection, their study included an urban community college, a Jesuit institution, and a private liberal arts college all within the United States.
- The Feedback team conducted a **mixed methods survey of faculty and instructors** from institutions all over the globe to grasp how feedback is understood and implemented.
- The Peer Relationships team ran **interviews and focus groups with students** at three institutions: one in the United Kingdom, one in the United States, and one in Singapore. The case studies focused on programs with embedded peer mentors and were geared towards minority students at two of the three institutions.
- The Relationships team facilitated **interviews of STEM teachers** at four institutions in Canada, United States, Sweden, and New Zealand to investigate what the teachers do in the classroom to build trust within their learning environments.
- The Connections to Broader Context team created and distributed an **online survey to students** attending two universities in the United States to deepen knowledge about why they did or did not complete an internship and the perceived benefits and barriers.



EMERGING WORKING PRINCIPLES IN DEVELOPMENT

As higher education institutions around the globe grapple with how to deal with ballooning costs, declining enrollment, and loss of revenue, they must also continue to advocate for why higher education is still a leading space and path for meaningful learning conditions. Findings from this research seminar clearly articulate the need for (re)investment in meaningful learning conditions, which at first glance might appear in direct opposition to the current financial state of many colleges and universities. However, **infrastructure and operational support** are critical needs to bring meaningful learning conditions to a sustainable scale, and that investment is an attractive and authentic signal to all constituents that their learning and pedagogy is valued.

Explicitly **aligning initiatives with institutional values** offers one way to garner sustainable support for these practices. Intentional messaging should not only signal how to get involved, but also the purpose or outcomes of engagement (to students, faculty, and staff) and the overall benefit to the institution. Change management, specifically the **implementation of high-quality, equitable practices**, is an essential strategy to consider when designing meaningful learning conditions.

An area of change or re-centering that permeated all the research questions and subsequent findings was the roles of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Findings alluded to and identified where attunement to diversity and engaging inclusive practices informed both students' and teachers' pedagogy experience. The need for multiple pathways to access various learning conditions, development of a shared reciprocal culture, and trust informed by identity or positionality awareness, were vibrant takeaways from the research. However, these findings do not dig as deep as possible into the needed focus on generating sustainable equity. While there was intentionality and an attempt to center voices and experiences historically at the margin of mainstream SoTL work, cultivating the necessary trust with marginal voices to be seen as an amplifier and partner as opposed to gentrifier or wary stranger takes significant time and strategic planning. This current research continues to open the doors for consideration of how sociocultural context is woven into design assumptions of these learning experiences, but it does not eliminate the door and thus there is a danger of it closing again. Future research and practice should continue to examine how conditions for meaningful learning in formal and informal spaces are shaped by both campus and broader socio-political cultures and policies.

Simply, the collective research findings suggest that for meaningful learning conditions to flourish, they must do so not in isolation or siloed nooks, but as an intentionally reinforced and interconnected nucleus for holistic student development for all learners in higher education (e.g., students, faculty, and staff).



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